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The defining features of Gandhian nonviolence

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Abstract
The two basic principles or ideals that guided Gandhi's life were truth and nonviolence. For him truth was God and realising this truth as God was the ultimate purpose of life. He expounded the proposition that truth could be realised only through nonviolence: "Truth is the end and nonviolence the means." Gandhi gave his own definition and explanation of nonviolence which transcended conventional understanding of the concept. For Gandhi nonviolence was not a negative concept meaning non-injury or non-killing but a positive one which meant love in the sense of selfless service of one's fellow beings which included the entire creation. The essence of his arguments is that one must try to practise nonviolence in thought word and deed and to organise all life activities on its basis, and that would bring in unprecedented and revolutionary changes in human life. The paper attempts to codify and put in perspective the defining features of nonviolence as understood, explained and practised by Mahatma Gandhi.

Keywords
Gandhi's nonviolence, contemporary nonviolence, social change, ethics, nonviolent future

Las características representativas de la no violencia Gandhiana

Resumen
Los dos principios o ideales básicos que dirigieron la vida de Gandhi fueron la verdad y la no violencia. Para él, la verdad era Dios, y llevar a cabo esta verdad como Dios fue el máximo propósito de su vida. Propuso la teoría de que la verdad solamente se podría llevar a cabo mediante la no violencia: "La verdad es el fin, y la no violencia, el medio". Gandhi brindó su propia definición y explicación de la no violencia que trascendía el entendimiento convencional del concepto. Para Gandhi, la no violencia no fue un concepto negativo significando no dañar o no matar, sino un concepto positivo que significaba el amor en el sentido del servicio altruista para nuestros seres compañeros, lo que incluye toda la creación. La esencia de sus argumentos es que uno debe intentar la práctica no violenta en pensamiento, palabra y obra, y organizar todas las actividades de la vida sobre este fundamento. Esto ocasionaría cambios revolucionarios sin precedente en la vida humana. Este estudio intenta codificar

Palabras clave
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y poner en perspectiva las características representativas de la no violencia como fueron entendidas, explicadas y practicadas por Mahatma Gandhi.

It was the prevalence of violence–personal and structural–witnessed all around that prompted Gandhi to probe this malady in depth. He diagnosed modern manifestations of violence as a civilizational disease. Modern western civilization, as he saw it in the latter half of the 19th century, was characterized by the generation and promotion of the craze for material progress and physical (read sensual) enjoyment. This indiscriminate pursuit of power and enjoyment was unleashing, at depth, the forces of violence both at the level of the individual and at the level of systems and structures, although apparently it was letting free the forces of production in Nature and the inventive genius of humans. Modern western civilization tended to promote competition, greed and avarice and, in the process, it drained almost every human transaction of its ethics and normative values; it legitimized the use of any means if they brought or bought success; it replaced restraint with hedonism and ultimately God with Mammon. All these negative tendencies were clear to the discerning minds of the West; Gandhi was neither the first nor the only one to draw the attention of the world to them. What distinguished Gandhi from the rest of the critics of western culture was his insight that identified violence as the most dangerous and portentous force embedded in modern western civilization. And hence like a prophet he warned humanity to be wary of it. Gandhi foresaw the impending reign of violence which, according to him, was the inevitable product of modern materialistic, sensate civilization. So he advocated a total rejection of this violence-procreating civilization. He, at the same time, identified and projected *ahimsa* or nonviolence as the only force capable of confronting violence and urged humanity for a conscious implantation of the principle of nonviolence into the very centre of our being and existence.

The first defining feature of Gandhi's nonviolence is the correlation between nonviolence and truth. According to Gandhi's own admission the jewel of *ahimsa* was discovered in the search for and contemplation of truth. In order to bring out the complementarity of the two, he compared truth and nonviolence to two sides of an unstamped metallic disc. Here, Gandhi's logic is very simple but compelling. For Gandhi truth was both absolute and relative. Absolute truth, by its very nature, was beyond human comprehension, though human beings were endowed with the ability to seek and find truth. Truth as individuals comprehended it from moment to moment was what Gandhi meant by relative truths. As each person can have his/her own (relative) truth, what was the way to vindicate one's truth? It was clear to

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Gandhi that it was improper and unjustifiable to impose one's truth on others (as the mythological Hiranyakashipu attempted to do) because what appeared to be true now might be revealed as untrue at a later point of time. Hence imposing or compelling one's truth on others was unjustifiable, both epistemologically and ethically. So, Gandhi argued that one must be willing to take all the consequences of bearing witness to one's truth upon oneself. That is the way of nonviolence. Thus, for Gandhi nonviolence was the only justifiable way to truth; not only to progress towards truth but also to vindicate truth. That was why he gave the *dictum*: "Truth is the end and *ahimsa* the means thereto." (*From Yeravda Mandir*, p. 7).

The second defining feature of Gandhi's nonviolence is related to the very nature of the word 'nonviolence'. Being a word with negative prefix nonviolence instantaneously suggests negative meanings. So normally nonviolence is understood to mean non-hurting, non-injuring, non-killing, etc. But this was not what Gandhi really meant by nonviolence. He explained:

> *Ahimsa* is not the crude thing it has been made to appear. Not to hurt any living thing is, no doubt, a part of *ahimsa*. But it is its least expression. The principle of *ahimsa* is hurt by every evil thought, undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody. It is also violated by our holding on to what the world needs. (*From Yeravda Mandir*, p. 7)

It is obvious that for Gandhi nonviolence was not a negative concept; it was pregnant with very positive connotations. He wrote: "*Ahimsa* is not merely a negative state of harmlessness, but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer." (*Young India*, August 25, 1920, p.2) He hastened to add that doing good to the evil-doer did not mean helping the evil-doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love–the active state of *ahimsa*–required one to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating oneself from him, even though it might offend him or injure him physically. Emphasising the aspect of love in *ahimsa* Gandhi wrote:

> *Ahimsa* means "love" in the Pauline sense, and yet something more than the "love" defined by Paul...*Ahimsa* includes the whole creation, and not only human. Besides, "Love" in the English language has other connotations too, and so I was compelled to use the negative word. But it does not, as I told you, express a negative force, but a force superior to all the forces put together. (*Harijan,* March 14, 1936, p. 39)

Expatiating further on what *ahimsa* as love meant, Gandhi wrote:

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> In its positive form, *ahimsa* means the largest love, the greatest charity. If I am a follower of *ahimsa* I must love my enemy...It is no nonviolence if we merely love those who love us. It is nonviolence only when we love those that hate us. I know how difficult it is to follow this grand Law of Love. But are not all great and good things difficult to do? Love of the hater is the most difficult of all. But by the grace of God, even this most difficult thing becomes easy to accomplish". (*Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi,* p. 346)

The third point is that Gandhi characterised *ahimsa* as "soul force". He wrote: "Nonviolence is soul force or the power of the Godhead within us. We become Godlike to the extent we realise nonviolence." (*Harijan*, March 14, 1936, p. 39). Because it is soul force it is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind, argued Gandhi and added that "it is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man", and thus, working under the law of nonviolence it was possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire.

It is absorbing to note how Gandhi developed a well-knit theory of nonviolence. Gandhi's penetrating mind discovered the subtle levels and ways through which violence operated and conquered human mind. So he tried to confront violence both at the theoretical and practical levels. He argued that, though there is good and evil in human nature (note that 'the good' is identified as the capacity for nonviolence and 'the evil' as the impulse and willingness for violence) human nature was essentially and basically good. One might be carried away by the death and destruction that one saw all around. But Gandhi argued that he could see life persisting in the midst of all these destructions. Life as a force, a power, continued to flow, evolve, develop and advance towards its destined goal of divine perfection. Gandhi wrote:

> Consciously or unconsciously, we are acting non-violently towards one another in our daily life. All well-constructed societies are based on the law of nonviolence. I have found that life persists in the midst of destruction and, therefore, there must be a higher law than that of destruction. Only under that law would a well-ordered society be intelligible and life worth living. And, if that is the Law of Life we have to work it out in daily life. (*Young India*., Oct. 10, 1931)

Thus Gandhi comes to the conclusion that "nonviolence or love is the law of our being" and this is the first major postulate of his theory of nonviolence.

Subsequent to this Gandhi argued that nonviolence is "the law of our species" as well. The bond that unites human beings is

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the bond of love and nonviolence, and certainly not that of hate or violence. He wrote:

> I claim that even now, though the social structure is not based on a conscious acceptance of nonviolence, the entire world over mankind lives and men retain their possessions on the sufferance of one another. If they had not done so, only the fewest and the most ferocious would have survived. But such is not the case. Families are bound by ties of love and so are groups. (*Harijan*, Feb.22, 1942)

Hence the second postulate that nonviolence is the law of humanity.

Gandhi went further to say that nonviolence was the law that operated through history. It really marked the dynamics of history. He considered human history as a gradual unfolding in *ahimsa* or nonviolence. History, for Gandhi, marked a conscious attempt to control and regulate the operation of violence with a view to minimise it. Therefore, he considered human history as an expression of progressive nonviolence. It did not mean for Gandhi that there is a linear progression in the unfolding of nonviolence in history. It is a fact that there are periods of regression like the present times. But viewed from a long term perspective it is evident that humanity is seriously attempting to control the use of violence in human affairs and minimise its influence. He wrote:

> The world is held together by the bonds of love. History does not record the day-to-day incidents of love and service. It only records incidents of conflicts and wars. Actually, however, acts of love and service are much more common in this world than conflicts and quarrels….If the world were full of quarrel and discord, (villages and towns) could not flourish. (*Bapu's Letters to the Ashram Sisters*, 1961, p. 113)

To crown his explanation of the central place and role that nonviolence has in human life, he drew a comparison between the physical force of gravitation and the moral force of nonviolence. As the force of gravitation holds everything in the physical universe together in its proper place and regulates its motion and maintains its kinetic nature, the power of love or nonviolence acts as the cohesive force in human life, organizing and guiding human relations with least friction. It, thus, assumes the dimension of a law which is the moral equivalent of the law of gravitation in physical nature. Gandhi wrote:

> Scientists tell us that without the presence of the cohesive force amongst the atoms that comprise this globe of ours, it would

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> crumble to pieces and would cease to exist. And even as there is cohesive force in blind matter so must there be in all things animate; and the name of that cohesive force among animate beings is love…Where there is Love there is Life; hatred leads to destruction. (*Young India*, May 5, 1920).

In short, nonviolence for Gandhi is the law of our being, the cohesive law of love that binds humanity together and makes collective life possible and meaningful. It is also the power that operates through history facilitating human evolution towards the fulfilment of its destiny. So he wanted humanity to accept nonviolence as an article of faith–i.e., in thought, word and deed–and organize life on the basis of the principle of nonviolence. Gandhi was not content with advancing sound arguments in justification of the acceptance of nonviolence as the central organising principle of human life and existence. He demonstrated to the world the efficacy of nonviolence by making it the basis of his personal life and of all his public activities including the fight for rights and freedom.

Gandhian nonviolence is premised on certain basic assumptions and convictions. The most fundamental of them is recognition of the oneness of life. All life is one. Everything that exists is intricately and inseparably inter-related. It is, in fact, a living consciousness of this oneness of life that provides the metaphysical and spiritual foundation for the acceptance of positive and active nonviolence as an article of faith. Gandhi described nonviolence as 'soul force', a constituent characteristic of the human spirit. Once this is accepted, not merely at the intellectual level but deep at the level of one's psyche and spirit, the lines that separate persons and things, you and I, would fade away. So one attains the realisation that one cannot harm or injure another without at the same time harming oneself; hurting others is hurting oneself. In order to attain this consciousness one has to undergo a process of self-purification through an arduous process of conquering one's ego and reducing oneself to a cipher. Gandhi and some members of his ashram achieved this through the practice of ethical vows, known as *ekadasavrta*–eleven vows (see M. K. Gandhi, *From Yeravda-Mandir* and *Ashram Observances in Action*). When nonviolence is practised with as much 'scientific precision' as possible, it even tends to develop into an objective force. Such nonviolence transcends time and space and becomes a perennial source of inspiration and a point of reference for the votaries of *ahimsa*. Also it becomes a force/power that can move mountains, even the most immovable mountains of human minds. Gandhi demonstrated this potentiality of the power of nonviolence when he calmed the mad fury of the violent mobs in Bengal and Delhi who were engaging themselves in a killing spree in the communal riots that followed the partition of India in 1947.

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Gandhi's contribution was not limited to developing nonviolence into a great spiritual and moral power by practicing it in thought, word and deed. For him nonviolence was not a cloistered virtue. He made nonviolence the central organizing principle of all his activities, social, economic and political. His unique contribution, it is generally agreed, lay in developing nonviolence into a matchless method of fighting against injustice and exploitation, architecturing the weapon of *Satyagraha*–nonviolent direct action.

Gandhi believed that nonviolence being soul force or love force, has universal applicability. It could be used for resolving any form of dispute and conflict, removing even a dictatorial regime. He had used it in the solution of the problem of racial and political discrimination in South Africa, and also for the removal of several social evils like untouchability, discriminations against women and girl-children, alcoholism etc., that had infected Indian social life. As nonviolence is soul force and as everyone is gifted with soul Gandhi argued that everyone is capable of using nonviolence. He demonstrated through his nonviolent movement that even ordinary people, the illiterate, the poor and the so called weaker sex–women–were capable of wielding the weapon of nonviolence as effectively as any other accomplished persons. Thus, the Gandhian nonviolent movement exploded the myth that nonviolence was the prerogative of the morally or spiritually evolved few. Through proper mobilisation and training quite ordinary people–even 'the lowliest, the lowest and the least'–could be empowered to become brave nonviolent resisters or satyagrahies. This fact has infused great confidence and hope into the nonviolent movements all over the world.

Gandhian nonviolence had been analysed from various angles by scholars and activists from different socio-political settings. We also have to take cognisance of the attempts made by action groups to apply Gandhian nonviolence in entirely different cultural settings from the ones in which Gandhi had applied it. Hence we come across some incisive commentaries on Gandhi's practice of nonviolence. One of the significant critiques is the distinction made between principled and strategic nonviolence. For example, Gene Sharp in his very popular books *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973), and *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (2005), analyses nonviolence solely as a technique. He did not attach much importance to the acceptance of nonviolence as a principle; nor did he consider it important for its effective use. He is convinced that pragmatic, strategically planned nonviolent struggle can be made highly effective for application in conflicts to lift oppression and as a substitute for violence. In this context it is important to bear in mind that Gandhi's concept of nonviolence is comprehensive. Gandhian nonviolence has a sound theoretical foundation and his *praxis* was grounded in theory. For Gandhi there was no dis-

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junction between principle and practice and therefore, any strategy that was not rooted in sound principles was likely to prove counter-productive. When we study the history of the application of nonviolence as a strategy in different parts of the world we witness that a new awareness about the inherent limitations and weakness of using nonviolence as a mere strategy is growing among many of the prominent leaders. Nelson Mandela is probably the most illustrious example. We know that while Albert Luthuli (1899-1967) was strongly committed to nonviolence as a principle, Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress adopted nonviolence only as a strategy. But after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, there was obviously a rethinking which was inspired by the words of Albert Luthuli that "nonviolence has not failed us, we failed nonviolence". Once in power, Mandela refused to sanction any recriminations and initiated a process of healing in the true spirit of nonviolence (see Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom,* pp. 119, 261). Mandela's is not a lone case. The crucial significance of accepting nonviolence as an article of faith and trying to practise it in thought, word and deed is recognised by more and more votaries of *ahimsa* around the world.

It must also be mentioned at this juncture that Gandhi did not make a fetish of his *ahimsa*, in spite of his ardent insistence on it. He admitted that "perfect nonviolence is impossible so long as we exist physically, for we want at least some space to occupy. Perfect nonviolence, while you inhabit this body, is only a theory like the Euclid's point or straight line, but we have to endeavour every moment of our lives." (quoted in K. P. Mishra, *Gandhi and the Contemporary World*, p. 53). But Gandhi warned that such unpreventable violence (which he characterised as 'existential violence') should not be made an excuse for rationalising the use of violence. It is also important to note that Gandhi made a fundamental distinction between nonviolence of the weak and nonviolence of the brave. According to him nonviolence could be practised only by the brave, and certainly not by the weak or the cowardly.

Humanity is in a "now or never" situation. It is true that organized violence has built its own cathedrals, the armament industry and the stockpile facilities of weapons of infinite destructive power and has almost mystified the world. But we must know that unless we start acting right now it may be too late. And we must begin from one's own self and try to reach out. A systematic transformation of the human self through the conscious and assiduous cultivation of the nonviolence latent in each one of us is the first step in the direction of a nonviolent future. But for Gandhi personal transformation was not an end in itself. It was a means towards the realization of the larger goal of social transformation. Only transformed individuals will be able to bring about social transformation. Unless and until personal transformation

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lead to organized attempt to change and transform society, it would be of no avail. Hence Gandhi emphasised the collective use of nonviolence for the creation of a culture of nonviolence.

Gandhi pointed out that as nonviolence was the law of our being and the cohesive force that held human life together, it was essential to make nonviolence the central organizing principle of all human transactions and activities. Social, political and economic organizations should be made on the basis of the law of nonviolence. He explained that when life came to be organized consciously on the basis of the principle of nonviolence, its results would be unthinkable, probably far beyond what humans can visualize. In order to bring home this point, he drew in the comparison of the revolutionary changes brought about by the application of the force of gravitation by physical sciences. Following the discovery and systematization of the force of gravitation by Newton, physical sciences took a great leap forward and it led to revolutionary changes in all areas of human life. A conscious and systematic application of the principle of nonviolence would produce more far-reaching changes in human life than what was done by the Newtonian formulations. One who has examined the role played by the power of nonviolence at the individual level as well as at the level of collective life would definitely agree with Gandhi and share his conviction about the great transforming power of nonviolence.

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